

CHAPTER SIX: THE SYDNEY QUEEN

Having given a brief run-down on the punts that serviced the Stockton/Newcastle crossing over the years, there is one more yet to do – the Sydney Queen, although this vessel didn't ever operate in Newcastle Harbour like the others. The reason we need to include details about her is because the bloke who bought the Kooroongaba, the Lurgurena and the Koondooloo when the punt service was discontinued at the end of 1971 (Mr Stuart White) also bought the Sydney Queen and had her towed up to Newcastle to join the others on the ill-fated tow to the Philippines (see chapter 9). The Sydney Queen had a number of incarnations in her lifetime of sterling service, being known variously as the vehicular ferry Kalang, the showboat Kalang, the Navy repair ship AB97, and the showboat Sydney Queen. When bought by Stuart White she had been laid up in Sydney gathering barnacles for some 8 years after she ceased to be a commercially viable proposition as a showboat in 1963.



L. Banks Pic

Wooden scale model of the Sydney Queen made by Trevor Watson on display at the South West Rocks Maritime Museum.

Initially named the Kalang, she was purpose-built at Crichton's slipways at Saltney, England, as a vehicular ferry for the Dawes Point/Milsons Point run on Sydney Harbour, to help cope with the increasing cross-harbour vehicular traffic while the Harbour Bridge was being built. She left Liverpool under her own steam in April 1926, and arrived in Sydney some three months later after "a perilous voyage" not dissimilar to the one suffered by the Koondooloo on her trip out (see chapter 5). The Dawes Point/Milsons Point car punt run became redundant after the Harbour Bridge was opened in 1932 and the Kalang languished in mothballs until 1938 when, encouraged by the success of the Koondooloo as a showboat, Sydney Ferries Ltd converted her to a very fancy-looking double-decker passenger vessel

at Balmain and pressed her into service as a showboat as well. She shared the harbour with the Koondooloo showboat until war broke out. In this first showboat format she was still known as the Kalang.*

But the Kalang's job as a floating entertainment palace didn't last all that long. When the war in the Pacific broke out she was taken over by the Navy, stripped of her upper decks and fancy fittings, and converted to a rather ugly but very practical floating workshop. In October 1942 she was sent to service small craft (of both the RAN and the US Navy) which were operating in the waters around New Guinea and Borneo. In this role she was known as AB97, and had a crew of 82, mainly engineers. Her voyage north to the islands to take up her commission was a difficult one as the under-surface of her flat bow magnified the impact of large waves when she was heading into heavy seas. Because she ran on coal she had a range of some 1600 nautical miles, (which was considerably less than diesel-powered car ferries could manage), but it proved adequate for the wartime demands placed on her. Nonetheless, I found myself wondering where and how she would have loaded coal in that part of the world, since it seems unlikely that she would have discharged her wartime duties on the one load of coal she started out with. I'm still wondering.



G. Andrews pic

The Kalang after she had been converted to the floating workshop vessel AB97 for war service

After the war, Kalang was brought back to Sydney and converted back to a showboat, with two enclosed decks and seating on the open air top deck between the two wheelhouses – much as she was before her wartime exploits. The refit was carried out by the State Dockyards in Newcastle in 1947, and she took up her

*When I was a very small boy, we lived in an upstairs flat in Louisa Road, Birchgrove which ran down the spine of Long Nose Point, (this was well before Louisa Road became a desirable address), and I can remember often seeing the Kalang steam past at night with every window ablaze with light and hearing the sound of the band and people having a good time wafting quite clearly across the water.

showboat duties on October 5 of that year. She could carry almost 2000 people and became a familiar sight again on the harbour, especially at night as her passengers danced to the band on her large ballroom floor, enjoyed the cabaret shows, or canoodled on the upper deck. On her morning excursions she'd go under the Sydney Harbour Bridge and up into the Lane Cove River, then up the Parramatta River as far as Mortlake, while her afternoon route left Circular Quay for the south shore of Sydney Harbour, then went under the Spit Bridge and through Middle Harbour and across to Killarney picnic ground. In 1954 you could stay on board all day and see most of the harbour for seven bob (the two cruises covered 50 miles altogether), and five bob bought you a ticket for the Saturday and Sunday night concert cruises which took place after the cruises on weekend afternoons.



Frank Hurley Pic

There wasn't a lot of room to spare getting through the Spit Bridge, and the passage was often made even more difficult if there were unfavourable currents running.

Known as "the best place in Sydney for a party", in these golden years after the war she was said to have carried more than a quarter of a million passengers a year on her harbour cruises – (including one cruise that consisted of 1500 lady bowlers). As Geoff Allen summed it up in an article he wrote for the Sun Herald in 1970, *in her varied careers she was a rendezvous for socials and charity events; cars were 'launched' on her; church groups held hymn singing socials; and models launched furs, bikinis and glamorous clothes.*

A popular song of the time recorded by the Andrews Sisters, *The Ferry Boat Serenade*, had lyrics which could have been written with the Kalang in mind:

*"I love to ride the ferry, where music is so merry,
There's a man who plays the concertina,
On the moonlit upper deck arena.
While boys and girls are dancing
And sweethearts are romancing,
Life is like a mardi gras, funiculi, funicula,
Happy, as we cling together,
Happy, as we sing together,
Happy with the ferryboat serenade."*



My mother used to sing this ditty sometimes when she was doing the washing up, and she was able to supply the lyrics for me. She's 96 as I write this.

The Kalang was heavily patronised by revellers and tourists, summer and winter, and was quite a successful commercial enterprise in the early years after the war, but as the 1950s progressed the patronage dropped off. Graeme Andrews reckons that this was because of changing recreational habits. Beaches were becoming more easily accessible by public transport and the accelerating postwar growth of car ownership provided an expanding range of possibilities for weekend recreation.

At this stage Kalang was owned by Harbour Lighterage and Showboat Ltd, and when the bottom line continued to look pretty grim they tried to sell her to the NSW Government. But the government bean-counters could see the writing on the economic wall and wouldn't be in it, and in 1958 she was again put into retirement. But not for long.

In September 1960 she was bought by a consortium of Sydney businessmen, Messrs Monroe and Bern, who tried all sorts of things in an effort to recapture the popularity Kalang had once enjoyed with the public. The first thing they did was to give her a new name – the Sydney Queen. Then she was spruced up a bit, given a lick of white paint and put back into service - now running on oil rather than coal. Well-known entertainers of the time like Bobby Limb, Jimmy Little and Reg Lindsay did regular gigs, along with not-so-well-remembered 'artistes' as Margot the Z-Bomb (the mind boggles). When business continued to flag there was even talk of turning her into a 'boatel', but this didn't eventuate. Graeme Andrews puts it this way: *Jazz bands rocked the old girl's timber decks once more but it was no use. Strip shows and nude reviews were tried but even this did not work – her time was past and her re-entry to the harbour had coincided with the 1961 economic squeeze.*

She was eventually bought by Harbour Restaurants Pty Ltd, but despite repeated entreaties the company was unable to obtain permission from the Maritime Services Board to turn her into a floating restaurant. It was also mooted that she might be operated outside the heads as a floating casino, but this didn't get off the ground either. So, from 1963 till 1971 she was laid up at either Snails Bay at Long Nose Point or in front of the Nicholson ferry base where she developed 'a scabby look' due to peeling paint and the occasional attention of vandals. She was still quite sound – she didn't need pumping out for all the time she was laid up – but nobody could think of a profitable use for her. So, eight years later, when Stuart White came with his plan to tow her to the Philippines with the other three car punts from Newcastle, the owners jumped at the chance to be rid of her, and White picked her up for a song and had her towed to Newcastle in time to be towed north with the others.

The nuts and bolts data for the Sydney Queen are as follows:

Length: 187 ft (56.99m)
Beam: 35.6 ft (10.85m)
Draught: 13.1 ft (3.99m)
Gross Register: 525
Net Register: 215
Speed: 13 knots

As a vehicular ferry she was capable of carrying up to 80 vehicles. As a showboat she was licensed to carry 1,925 people plus 25 crew (including catering staff), and had a modern kitchen with a milk bar, a grand piano and a tallow wood dance floor which could hold up to 500 people.

To give you some idea of the detail involved in the process of preparing the Sydney Queen to be towed to Newcastle, and thence to the Philippines, I've included here the report of the Principal Marine Surveyor for NSW who had to decide what had to be done to her to make her fit to undertake the voyage..

GWR/KP

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Principal Marine Surveyor, M.S.N.

"SYDNEY QUEEN" - TOWAGE:

On 24 November Mr Stewart White rang me and said that he had purchased the 'Sydney Queen' and proposed to have her towed to Manila. He wished to arrange an inspection on the following day as there had been several previous propositions concerning this vessel.

2. I discussed the matter with the Principal Surveyor in order to learn if any firm decisions had been made. We agreed that if the vessel was to be an unmanned tow dry docking would be unreasonable. It was decided that the most suitable means of ensuring watertightness would be to open all side windows on the main deck and the doors so that water would rapidly flow over the side. The central casing around the engine room would be made watertight as would also all hatchways.

3. By arrangement the following morning I visited the vessel berthed at Morte Bay Point with Mr White. I described to him the manner in which the work was to be carried out. The forward and after windows were to be boarded up with 2" timber, the sides left open as earlier described. The side of the central casing adjacent to the bar (which I shall hereafter describe as the port side) has a number of windows in it. I described the manner in which this should be rendered watertight by covering with either 2" blanking or sheets of 1" waterproof ply wood. The starboard side of the casing has steel doors in it and these were to be secured watertight and hose tested prior to departure. I described the battering down arrangements for the hatchways and the closing of ventilators and air pipes.

4. On my return to the office I discussed the matter with the Principal Surveyor and it was agreed that at a later stage an engineer surveyor would inspect the closing of seawater connections when the owner of the vessel had a person available and competent to do this work.

5. On 17 December I again visited the vessel with Mr White. At that time all hatchways, ventilators and air pipes had been satisfactorily rendered watertight. The closing of the windows on the port side of the casing was not completed. There were no navigation lights fitted nor a day time towing signal. The Ship's cable had been passed completely around to form a bridle at the forward end (this being the bow ^{excepting} the convention of port and starboard previously used) at the after end the cable had been backed on to the bits. It was ~~secured~~ on the sponson. I told Mr White that the remaining closing up must be done and that some lugs should be welded to the steel portion of the sponson to ensure the cable did not slip off if it became slack whilst preparing the tow. I told him that navigation lights and towing signal ~~should~~ be provided. He advised that these would be supplied by the towing vessel, 'Polaris' and fitted by the crew of that ship. I raised the matter of the sea connections and the necessity of examination by an engineer surveyor. He said this would be attended to by an engineer of the 'Polaris'. He expected this vessel to arrive

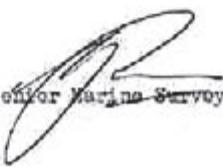
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in Sydney on the morning of 21 December and estimated the tow would leave about 48 hours later. After towing arrangements had been completed and the work mentioned above carried out he undertook to inform me when he would be ready for a further inspection. On the afternoon of 20 December I returned to the office at about 4.30 p.m. There was a note on my table stating "Polaris arrived 1500" and I think the further words "Mr Stewart White will ring again when he is ready". I am not sure of the last sentence but the words were to that effect. I understand that the telephone message was received by Mr Manning, Navigation Clerk. He cannot recall the words himself but he does recall a message concerning Polaris and it has been established that she arrived at the time mentioned above.

6. Upon receiving this message I rang Mr White on 797-9082. This is the number of a home unit which he has in the Silverwater area and uses both as an office and residence while in Sydney. I received no reply. This would not be surprising as there is every reason to believe that he would be at that time at the Polaris. I rang again the next morning again received no reply and spoke to Mr Inglis about arranging for an engineer surveyor, when we heard from Mr White. At that stage I confidently expected that he would be ready for survey on Wednesday 22 as previously indicated by the time he expected to take on the work. It was agreed that when we heard from him an inspection would be made.

7. On the afternoon of 22nd at about 1 p.m. I received a telephone call from Captain Quinlan in Newcastle telling me that the Polaris had arrived with the Sydney Queen in tow. He wished to know if I had made an inspection of the lifesaving appliances of Polaris. I told him that I did not know the tow had departed and that I had not seen the final closing up nor the towing arrangements and remarked that the situation would probably be alright as she was now in Newcastle and new towing arrangements would be necessary for the ensuing tandem tow. Immediately after this I informed the Principal Surveyor of the situation and remarked to him that it appeared there was little we could do other than leave the matter to the surveyors in Newcastle to ensure that the matter was properly attended to.

8. In my conversation with Captain Quinlan I learned that in his opinion the arrangements made leaving Sydney were satisfactory and I had no reason to doubt this even before I spoke to him particularly as I had been informed by the owner that the vessel's were not insured and their safety was his own responsibility.


Senior Marine Surveyor

26 January 1972

There is a certain flavour of careful backside-covering in this report. You'll notice that it was written soon after the three surviving car punts had been washed up on the beach at Trial Bay (see chapter 9). This report covers what was done to get the Sydney Queen to Newcastle. In chapter 10 there is a similar report covering the preparations that were ordered to be done to all four vessels before setting off on the long tow to the Philippines. They are both informative - but also exculpatory.